

THE WILD PLACES: WEEK 3

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2019

Monday, March 25

The great wild place of the Old Testament is ancient Israel's exile into foreign lands. The two halves of the divided kingdom were defeated by regional superpowers in the 8th and 6th centuries B.C. In exile, people questioned their faith and had to come to grips with failure, loss, powerlessness, pain, and doubt. This week we'll read some of the narrative texts of exile, and next week some of its poetry.

II Kings 25:1-21, 27-30 (CEB)

25 ¹So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's rule, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem with his entire army. He camped beside the city and built a siege wall all around it. ²The city was under attack until King Zedekiah's eleventh year. ³On the ninth day of the month, the famine in the city got so bad that no food remained for the common people. ⁴Then the enemy broke into the city. All the soldiers fled by night using the gate between the two walls near the King's Garden. The Chaldeans were surrounding the city, so the soldiers ran toward the desert plain. ⁵But the Chaldean army chased King Zedekiah and caught up with him in the Jericho plains. His entire army deserted him. ⁶So the Chaldeans captured the king and brought him back to the Babylonian king, who was at Riblah. There his punishment was determined. ⁷Zedekiah's sons were slaughtered right before his eyes. Then he was blinded, put in bronze chains, and taken off to Babylon.

⁸On the seventh day of the fifth month in the nineteenth year of Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan arrived at Jerusalem. He was the commander of the guard and an official of the Babylonian king. ⁹He burned down the LORD's temple, the royal palace, and all of Jerusalem's houses. He burned down every important building. ¹⁰The whole Chaldean army under the commander of the guard tore down the walls surrounding Jerusalem. ¹¹Then Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard exiled the people who were left in the city, those who had already surrendered to Babylon's king, and the rest of the population. ¹²The commander of the guard left some of the land's poor people behind to work the vineyards and be

farmers. ¹³The Chaldeans shattered the bronze columns, the stands, and the bronze Sea that were in the LORD's temple. They carried the bronze off to Babylon. ¹⁴They also took the pots, the shovels, the wick trimmers, the dishes, and all the bronze items that had been used in the temple. ¹⁵The commander of the guard took the fire pans and the sprinkling bowls, which were made of pure gold and pure silver. ¹⁶The bronze in all these objects—the two pillars, the Sea, and the stands that Solomon had made for the LORD's temple—was too heavy to weigh. ¹⁷Each pillar was twenty-seven feet high. The bronze capital on top of the first pillar was four and a half feet high. Decorative lattices and pomegranates, all made from bronze, were around the capital. And the second pillar was decorated with lattices just like the first.

¹⁸The commander of the guard also took away Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank, and the three doorkeepers. ¹⁹Of those still left in the city, Nebuzaradan took away an officer who was in charge of the army and five royal advisors who were discovered in the city. He also took away the secretary of the officer responsible for drafting the land's people to fight, as well as sixty people who were discovered in the city. ²⁰Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard took all of these people and brought them to the Babylonian king at Riblah. ²¹The king of Babylon struck them down, killing them in Riblah in the land of Hamath.

So Judah was exiled from its land.

²⁷In the year that Awil-merodach became king of Babylon, he released Judah's King Jehoiachin from prison. This happened in the thirty-seventh year of the

exile of King Jehoiachin, on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month. ²⁸Awil-merodach spoke kindly to Jehoiachin and seated him above the other kings who were with him in Babylon. ²⁹So Jehoiachin took off his

prisoner clothes and ate regularly in the king's presence for the rest of his life. ³⁰At the king's command, a regular food allowance was given to him every day for the rest of his life.

Points of Interest

- There are too many names and dates to worry about in a day's reading. Instead, picture the scene: there is a small country whose capital is besieged by the attacking army of a much larger country. Famine strikes so that the royalty is still eating, but everyone else starves. The army breaks through the wall. The defending army flees, abandoning the people, and then when the army is pursued, they abandon the king. Said king is tortured and exiled, his sons killed. How do you feel, left to live in the ruins of this city?
- Later, the conquering army returns and burns down your city. Many of the people who didn't die in the famine or the invasion are scattered; those that remain are carted off to become slaves. The few officials who try to hide out are kidnapped; word returns that they've been killed in a faraway land. The most beautiful building, your people's grand temple, is looted and then destroyed. If you are any one of these survivors, how do you feel about your life? How do you feel about the God of your country, the one you used to worship in the temple that is no more?
- The short paragraph, "Judah was exiled from its land" is the conclusion to this whole tale, the last chapter in this book. The nation is scattered. The dream is over.
- The books of Samuel and Kings tell a four-part history of the rise and fall of ancient Israel, including its southern kingdom of Judah, the last portion to remain independent. The story begins with an ascendant monarchy that the author thinks is a bad idea. A few kings, despite their significant faults, are given positive reports. Most are disappointments. And then four hundred years later, the last king of all the dynasties lives a life of luxury as a sell-out in the employ of his people's conqueror. The people's story ends with a betrayal. The people suffer, while their king eats well in their oppressor's service. This must have been a maddening story to read – so unjust, so unfair.

A Direction for Prayer

Perhaps some of your friends and family have experienced loss – the loss of homeland, the loss of loved ones, the loss of a dream. If so, pray that they have God's help to survive and to find a next chapter beyond this loss.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Growing Hope – This week, the exercise will vary slightly from day to day. Each day, though, you'll be invited to grow hope in your own wild place of exile – a loss that you or your culture has suffered, a dream that has died, some way that you don't belong, don't fit, or aren't understood in your current context.

The temptation in exile is to a death of faith or a loss of hope. Today, follow the lead of this passage, and honestly name to God and self the exile that most strikes you. Confess without shame your own temptation to a death of faith or a loss of hope.

Tuesday, March 26

II Chronicles 36:11-23 (CEB)

¹¹ Zedekiah was 21 years old when he became king, and he ruled for eleven years in Jerusalem. ¹² He did what was evil in the LORD his God's eyes and didn't submit before the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke for the LORD. ¹³ Moreover, he rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, despite the solemn pledge Nebuchadnezzar had forced him to swear in God's name. He became stubborn and refused to turn back to the LORD, Israel's God. ¹⁴ All the leaders of the priests and the people also grew increasingly unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations. They polluted the LORD's temple that God had dedicated in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ Time and time again, the LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers because he had compassion on his people and his dwelling. ¹⁶ But they made fun of God's messengers, treating God's words with contempt and ridiculing God's prophets to such an extent that there was no hope of warding off the LORD's rising anger against his people.

¹⁷ So God brought the Babylonian king against them. The king killed their young men with the sword in their temple's sanctuary, and showed no pity for young men or for virgins, for the old or for the feeble. God handed all of them over to him. ¹⁸ Then the king hauled everything off to Babylon, every item from God's

temple, both large and small, including the treasures of the LORD's temple and those of the king and his officials. ¹⁹ Next the Babylonians burned God's temple down, demolished the walls of Jerusalem, and set fire to all its palaces, destroying everything of value. ²⁰ Finally, he exiled to Babylon anyone who survived the killing so that they could be his slaves and the slaves of his children until Persia came to power. ²¹ This is how the LORD's word spoken by Jeremiah was carried out. The land finally enjoyed its sabbath rest. For as long as it lay empty, it rested, until seventy years were completed.

²² In the first year of Persia's King Cyrus, to carry out the LORD's promise spoken through Jeremiah, the LORD moved Persia's King Cyrus to issue the following proclamation throughout his kingdom, along with a written decree:

²³ This is what Persia's King Cyrus says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the earth's kingdoms and has instructed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Whoever among you belong to God's people, let them go up, and may the LORD their God be with them!

Points of Interest

- The two part book of Chronicles retells the story of Samuel and Kings from a different vantage point. Samuel and Kings were written earlier, during exile, trying to make sense of the end of the nation. Chronicles is written after Israel is reengaged in developing a collective civic and religious life, in a rebuilt temple. In Kings, the temple is Solomon's, in Chronicles it is God's. The Bible doesn't have a single angle on many things. Authors, though inspired by God, are influenced by their times, their culture, and their perspective. God lets God's children tell the story.
- One thing that can be helpful or challenging for readers of Chronicles is the author's insistence that a just God is orchestrating all events. King Zedekiah was godless and didn't listen to the prophet or keep his promise to his international colleague. The leaders and the priests assimilated to the faith of surrounding cultures, messed up Jerusalem's religious practice, and wouldn't listen to God's warnings. Therefore God gets angry and uses a bigger country to wipe them out. The black and white clarity and a certain kind of justice proposed are encouraging from one angle – the world is not chaotic or nihilistic; there is order and justice. Everything happens for a reason. On the other hand, the idea that an angry God set in motion mass killing, raping, destruction,

and exile is difficult for most of us to swallow. Is this consistent with a faithful God of love? Was this really necessary?

All we can say is that the authors of Chronicles thought so, and this gave them comfort. God lets God's children tell the story. Part of faithful Bible reading is to question what we read, ask if it is consistent with what we know of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and to draw our own conclusions.

- There's a bit of ecological justice woven into the story. God's people needed a timeout of sorts, but the land did as well. As crop scientists know, land needs rest, not just people.
- The Jewish Bible orders some books differently than do Christians. This is the last chapter in Jewish Bible. There's a hopeful ending here, a fast-forward to the time when Jews were commissioned to restore their temple and nation, and an invitation to all God's people to worship and do the work of God in our time.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your church, that each time people gather to worship, they will honor and love God with their whole hearts, and be inspired to hope and to do God's work in their time.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Growing Hope – This week, the exercise will vary slightly from day to day. Each day, though, you'll be invited to grow hope in your own wild place of exile – a loss that you or your culture has suffered, a dream that has died, some way that you don't belong, don't fit, or aren't understood in your current context.

The temptation in exile is to a death of faith or a loss of hope. Today, follow the lead of this passage, and look for signs of hope in your life or your generation. Make a list of what gives you hope for the future; consider sharing this list with a friend.

Wednesday, March 27

Daniel 1 (CEB)

¹ In the third year of the rule of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and attacked it. ² The Lord handed Judah's King Jehoiakim over to Nebuchadnezzar, along with some of the equipment from God's house. Nebuchadnezzar took these to Shinar, to his own god's temple, putting them in his god's treasury.

³ Nebuchadnezzar instructed his highest official Ashpenaz to choose royal descendants and members of the ruling class from the Israelites—⁴ good-looking young men without defects, skilled in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, conversant with learning, and capable of serving in the king's palace. Ashpenaz was to teach them the Chaldean language and its literature. ⁵ The king assigned these young men daily allotments from his own food and from the royal wine. Ashpenaz was to teach them for three years so that at the end of that time they could serve before the king. ⁶ Among these young men from the Judeans were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. ⁷ But the chief official gave them new names. He named Daniel "Belteshazzar," Hananiah "Shadrach," Mishael "Meshach," and Azariah "Abednego."

⁸ Daniel decided that he wouldn't pollute himself with the king's rations or the royal wine, and he appealed to the chief official in hopes that he wouldn't have to do so. ⁹ Now God had established faithful loyalty between Daniel and the chief official; ¹⁰ but the chief official said to Daniel, "I'm afraid of my master, the king, who has mandated what you are to eat and drink. What will happen if he sees your faces looking thinner than the

other young men in your group? The king will have my head because of you!"

¹¹ So Daniel spoke to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹² "Why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance to the appearance of the young men who eat the king's food. Then deal with your servants according to what you see."

¹⁴ The guard decided to go along with their plan and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. ¹⁶ So the guard kept taking away their rations and the wine they were supposed to drink and gave them vegetables instead. ¹⁷ And God gave knowledge, mastery of all literature, and wisdom to these four men. Daniel himself gained understanding of every type of vision and dream.

¹⁸ When the time came to review the young men as the king had ordered, the chief official brought them before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ When the king spoke with them, he found no one as good as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they took their place in the king's service. ²⁰ Whenever the king consulted them about any aspect of wisdom and understanding, he found them head and shoulders above all the dream interpreters and enchanters in his entire kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel stayed in the king's service until the first year of King Cyrus.

Points of Interest

- Out of the war, and into the exile we go. The young, talented men who Ashpenaz enrolls in Babylon University remind me of many international graduate students and young professionals I meet in my own large international college town. None of the men and women I meet were forcibly brought to this country, but they often represent the "best and the brightest" of their home cities. Sometimes they have left conditions of poverty and chaos. Often they are treated as outsiders in this land, but their experience here make them cultural and economic outsiders in their homelands as well.
- The new names that Daniel and his friends are given are part of Babylon's assimilation project. Get rid of people's culture and language and faith, and you eliminate the possibility of resistance. Empire is always giving us new names – trying to define us by the gods of our age: what we earn and buy and consume, the status markers of our education or zip codes or careers, and so much more. Daniel and the boys, from the author's

perspective, resist. They are still known to us and one another as their true selves, children of God.

- For whatever reason, the young exile Daniel finds eating the Babylonian diet one step too far in participating in the destruction of his culture and his faith. The rabbi Jonathan Sachs and the theologian Miroslav Volf have been helpful in identifying various postures people of faith can take in environments where their faith makes them unusual. There's total assimilation, total withdrawal, and total attempt to have one's own faith dominate – these three postures are the most common for faith exiles, but they all end badly. The best posture is to be a creative minority – to do what Daniel and friends do: engage creatively and deeply in culture, while still pursuing a distinct life one's faith creates. Daniel 1 is a kind of case study of this.
- Daniel's plan works, confirmed by two signs. One, he stays true to himself and true to his faith. Two, he flourished as a student and young professional, achieving all that he's expected and more. Healthy faith seems to lead toward radical withdrawal from cultural norms in some areas, and radical and favorable engagement in some others. All people of faith get to discern this balance in their own lives and times.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your friends and family that feel out of place in hostile educational or work environments, that God would give them courage to pursue a life of faith and be their true selves, and the God will give them favor and success in their learning or work as well.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Growing Hope – This week, the exercise will vary slightly from day to day. Each day, though, you'll be invited to grow hope in your own wild place of exile – a loss that you or your culture has suffered, a dream that has died, some way that you don't belong, don't fit, or aren't understood in your current context.

The temptation in exile is to a death of faith or a loss of hope. Today, if you are fasting this lent, ask yourself what the fasting is doing in you. Is it helping you break rhythm and detach from some of your life's norms? Is it making room more of God and more of hope in you? If you're not fasting, consider if there is a fast you can engage in today, or for the rest of Lent, that will break your attachment to your culture and make room for radical, counter-cultural hope in God.

Thursday, March 28

Daniel 3:1-18 (CEB)

³ King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue. It was ninety feet high and nine feet wide. He set it up in the Dura Valley in the province of Babylon.² King Nebuchadnezzar then ordered the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to assemble and come for the dedication of the statue that he had set up.³ So the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They stood in front of the statue the king had set up.⁴ The herald proclaimed loudly: “Peoples, nations, and languages! This is what you must do:⁵ When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.⁶ Anyone who will not bow down and worship will be immediately thrown into a furnace of flaming fire.”⁷ So because of this order as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, all the peoples, nations, and languages bowed down and worshipped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At that moment some Chaldeans came forward, seizing a chance to attack the Jews.⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar:

“Long live the king!¹⁰ Your Majesty, you gave a command that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument should bow down and worship the gold statue.¹¹ Anyone who wouldn’t bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire.¹² Now there are some Jews, ones you appointed to administer the province of Babylon—specifically, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who have ignored your command. They don’t serve your gods, and they don’t worship the gold statue you’ve set up.”

¹³ In a violent rage Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were brought before the king.

¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar said to them: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don’t serve my gods or worship the gold statue I’ve set up?¹⁵ If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I’ve made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won’t worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?”

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: “We don’t need to answer your question.¹⁷ If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us.¹⁸ But if he doesn’t, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you’ve set up.”

Points of Interest

- We’ll take our final story of exile in two parts.
- King Nebuchadnezzar is doing what all empires do – asserting their power through overt and covert control. The overt control is the statue and the call to worship, the covert is the behind the scenes machinations of the bureaucratic machine. The author teases it a bit with the repetition of the list of officials throughout the chapter. This kind of state control is more ridiculous and dangerous when a narcissistic leader is in power, but it operates at some level in most power structures.
- Some Chaldeans (for our purposes, roughly synonymous with Babylonians) seize the regulations as an excuse to target and scapegoat a minority group they resent. Anyone who claims order or legal compliance or other pragmatic reasons to do harm to a

minority group is reliving this passage's tyrannical, scapegoating violence. Examples abound through all of human civilization, our own times included.

- Unhealthy power hates nothing more than challenge, thus the king's emotional outburst.
- The lists of the instruments, like the list of bureaucrats, is a kind of poetic satire, highlighting the craziness of the story – God give us all grace to step back and notice all that is crazy and unhealthy about our politics, our economy, our culture.
- Civil disobedience doesn't count on victory, but on conscience and hope. Daniel's friends have lost their homeland, likely lost their families, and since chapter one, have lost their names. But they will not lose their faith – they won't sell out their minds, hearts, and souls, regardless of outcome.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your city and country to practice the genuine free civil society it likely professes, that all people – even misunderstood, mass incarcerated, or scapegoated minorities – would have the freedom to worship and work and pursue the best of their conscience and culture without fear.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Growing Hope – This week, the exercise will vary slightly from day to day. Each day, though, you'll be invited to grow hope in your own wild place of exile – a loss that you or your culture has suffered, a dream that has died, some way that you don't belong, don't fit, or aren't understood in your current context.

The temptation in exile is to a death of faith or a loss of hope. Today, follow the lead of this passage, asking God if there is anything in your faith that compels you to chart a different course than the one you're on, or to live differently in some regard. Ask God for courage to do so.

Friday, March 29

Daniel 3:19-30 (CEB)

¹⁹ Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. ²⁰ He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. ²¹ So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. (²² Now the king's command had been rash, and the furnace was heated to such an extreme that the fire's flame killed the very men who carried Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to it.) ²³ So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell, bound, into the furnace of flaming fire.

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, "Didn't we throw three men, bound, into the fire?"

They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He replied, "Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren't hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the

gods."²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. ²⁷ The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king's associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn't done anything to them: their hair wasn't singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn't even smell like fire!

²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar declared: "May the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be praised! He sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him. They ignored the king's order, sacrificing their bodies, because they wouldn't serve or worship any god but their God. ²⁹ I now issue a decree to every people, nation, and language: whoever speaks disrespectfully about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap, because there is no other god who can rescue like this."

³⁰ Then the king made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego prosperous in the province of Babylon.

Points of Interest

- Watch out for adults who are upset when they don't precisely get their way. There's always emotional unhealth or abuse of power or both behind that.
- Nebuchadnezzar's display of force is tragically rash. The strongest men in the army, the seven-times-more-potent capital punishment, the guards' suffering all highlight that wounded pride and vengeance are at play, not justice. It's like the villain's threat to kill one hundred of the enemy for every one of his lost, or like the modern superpower's unleashing of tons and tons of bombs to prevent or retaliate for its smaller experience of violence.
- When the execution doesn't go as planned, things get really strange. First, there are four men, not three. Then the impotency of the flames – no harm to hair or clothing or skin at all. Scholars and mystics and poets have marveled over this scene, speculating on the presence of an angel or even a pre-incarnate Christ (a fancy phase for God showing up in the flesh, long before the birth of Jesus).
- Nebuchadnezzar hasn't matured or grown through this experience – he's as rash and emotionally immature as ever. But the power of God to protect the people he tried to scapegoat and eliminate has given him respect for their god and restored them to protection and favor.

- Many Christians read this passage through the experiences of explicit persecution members of their own faith have experienced – usually small and sometimes invented ones in this time and place, deadly and brutal ones in other times and places. I think that’s fair (not the invented persecutions, but the rest), but my imagination takes this application further. When any minority group is persecuted, I like to think that the God of justice is empathetic to their cause, suffering with them, and rallying forces to work for their favor. In my country and my lifetime, the scapegoated victim has usually been of non-Christian religious faith, as well as people of color, immigrants, or sexual minorities. May the God of mercy walk with and protect all who are scapegoated and done harm because of power people’s fears.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any of your family and friends who are either unjustly victimized, for them to know God with them, and for God’s protection. Pray that God turns around any family or friends who out of their own fears, willingly participate in or stand silent in the face of the scapegoating of others.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Growing Hope – This week, the exercise will vary slightly from day to day. Each day, though, you’ll be invited to grow hope in your own wild place of exile – a loss that you or your culture has suffered, a dream that has died, some way that you don’t belong, don’t fit, or aren’t understood in your current context.

The temptation in exile is to a death of faith or a loss of hope. Today, follow the lead of this passage, asking God if there is any way you can stand in solidarity with people in your region who unjustly suffer. Perhaps your solidarity and hope can be expressed through your prayers or advocacy or service or civil disobedience.